The Ventura County

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Quarterly

Vol. XXIV, No. 1 Fall 1978

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The Ventura County Historical Society *Quarterly*

Vol. XXIV, No. 1 Fall 1978

Grant W. Heil, Editor

Contents

THE WIND SYCAMORE:
SOME J. P. HARRINGTON NOTES
ON A VENTURENO CHUMASH SHRINE
Edited with a Commentary by Travis Hudson

CHUMASH INDIAN BASKETRY AT SAN BUENAVENTURA
By Msgr. Francis J. Weber

Notice

Travis Hudson is the Curator of Anthropology at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History; he is the author of several articles and books on the Chumash Indians. Msgr. Francis J. Weber is Pastor of San Buenaventura Mission and diocesan archivisit.

The cover is a pencil drawing by Danilo Matteini of Westlake. David W. Hill photographed the baskets, and Tom Roe was the field photographer at the sycamore tree.

John Peabody Harrington (1884-1961)
The photograph is a family heirloom handed down by Chumash friends to their descendants in the Yee family.

The Wind Sycamore

SOME J. P. HARRINGTON NOTES ON A VENTUREÑO CHUMASH SHRINE

Edited with a Commentary by

Travis Hudson

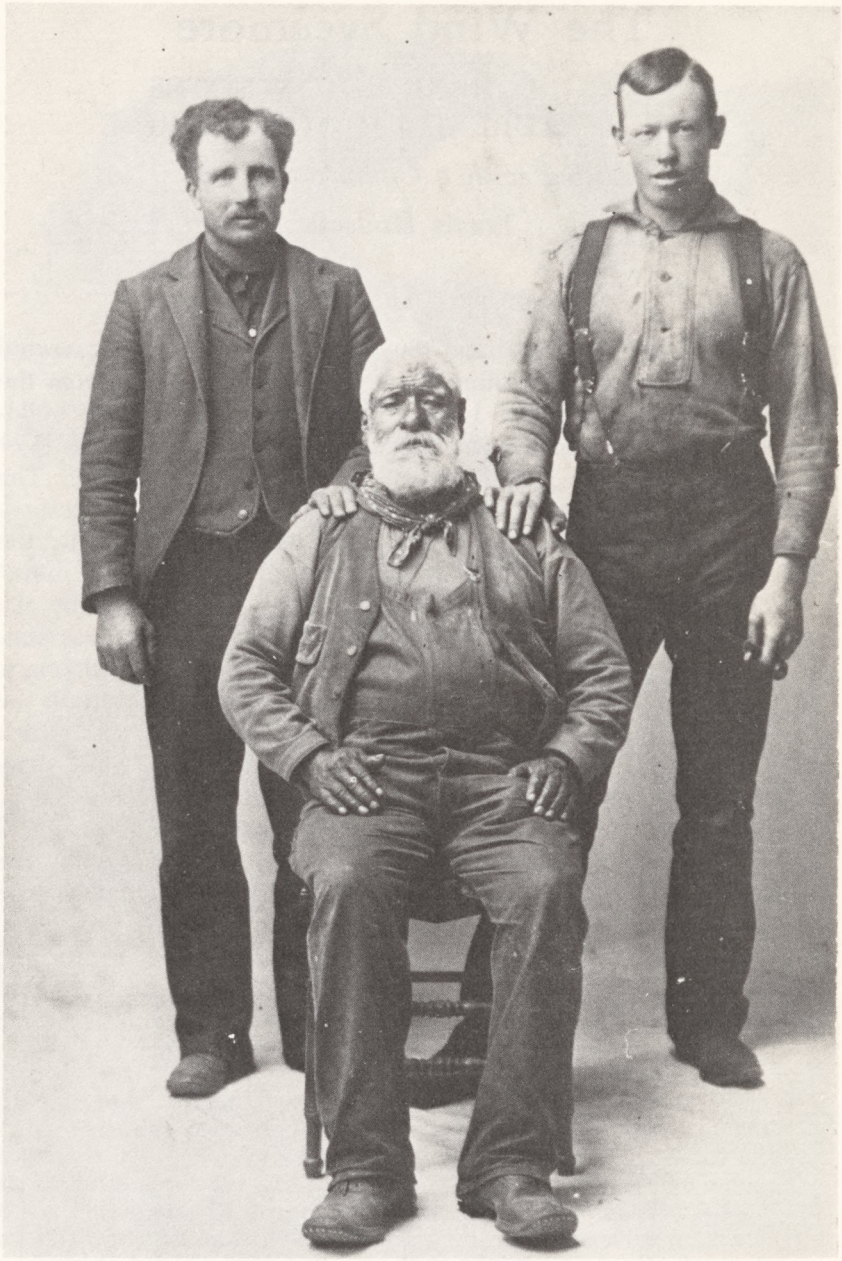
INTRODUCTION

Between the years 1804 and 1808 an adobe structure was erected on the east side of the Ventura River and some five miles from the sea near the old road which leads through Casitas Pass. This building, however humble it may have been, served as a religious outpost for Mission San Buenaventura, itself then under construction. The *assistencia* received the name Santa Gertrudis, and with it the neophyte Chumash who lived and worked in its surroundings. By the 1870's the tiny chapel fell into disrepair and subsequently into ruins.[1]

The chapel site was of course looked upon as sacred by the Roman Catholic Church, but of special interest is that it was considered no less so by the Ventureño Chumash. As gray-robed priests gathered their followers around them to conduct prayers beneath the oaks and sycamores at the chapel, they were Christianizing a Chumash ritual that had preceeded them into unknown depths of time. The process was no doubt intentional: as souls were to be converted to Christian ones, so were the locations upon which pagan rites had been performed. And at Santa Gertrudis this meant converting the symbolism attached by the Chumash to one particular natural feature of the area: a large sycamore tree.

Despite the efforts of the padres, Chumash beliefs concerning the sycamore survived even the chapel, and Ventura historian Sol Sheridan was to record them. His colorful description is worth quoting in full:

> The spot had always been a sacred one to the Indians. There at the point where the Casitas Pass road branches from the road to Ojai, stood their own sacred tree—a great sycamore under whose wide-spread boughs they had always assembled to worship their primeval god, and amongst whose leaves, even down to modern times, they were used to hang their offerings of gay feathers and bright cloth and the skins of wild animals.



Fernando Librado Kitsepawit (1804-1915)
Probably born on Santa Cruz Island, he lived his early years in Ventura.
(Lompoc Valley Historical Society photo)

Those who came after them grew to call that sycamore "The Wishing Tree," and a belief arose that a wish breathed beneath its shade would always come true. And, still later generations of lovers came to whisper vows there, and to know it as the "Kissing Tree."[2]

Sheridan was not alone, however, in recording Chumash beliefs about this special tree for anthropologist John Peabody Harrington became another. Harrington, who devoted a great deal of his interest in Indians to the Chumash, was to leave us with his descriptions in the form of rambling and scattered fieldnotes collected between the period of 1912 and 1915 while he was in the Ventura area. He interviewed local residents of Ventura about the tree, as well as an aged Chumash informant named Fernando Librado *Kitsepawit*, a very warm and charming old man who was to provide Harrington with considerable information on other Chumash rituals in Ventura.[3] These notes, found among Harrington's boxes of papers in the Smithsonian Institution's anthropological archives, are provided below and form the purpose of this paper. I have attempted to retain the original wording whenever possible by slight editing and organizing. A commentary in the form of footnotes is included. The endnotes were added by Grant Heil, Editor.

FIELDNOTES

Mrs. del Campo,* a very old Spanish California lady who has resided for many years in Ventura, said that a sycamore tree by the Casitas road was shaped like an arch. This arch was oriented so that its opening faced toward the south, just like a door. There was a hollow in the tree near the ground at one end, and here the Indians would deposit acorns, pine nuts and beads; they would also deposit baskets of ants at the tree. In front of the tree was a level place used by the Indians to erect an enclosure of brush.# Here some would dance and others would cry.

Within the hollow of the tree a god was hung. It was about two and a half feet long, unpainted and made from wood. It had

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* The wife of Flavio Martinez del Campo.

The brush enclosure was called the *siliyik* and is described in *The eye of the flute.*[4]

Pegs
Peg
Pegs

arms and legs; and the head had eyes, nose and mouth with feathers coming out of the nose. The thing [god?, arms?] was suspended by plugs from the shoulders, and there was a halo of hawk feathers in back of the god. The hollow itself was decorated with needlework and beads.

When the Indians wanted to wish someone wrong, they would turn a leg or an arm on the god and think that they had caused a corresponding affliction on their enemy.

An informant* said that girls used to be afraid when they passed a certain tree. She called the tree "Aliso del Viento" [Wind Sycamore]. There was said to always be a wind near the tree. They thought the idol in the tree was a god; they made offerings there. The chiefs, and not just anybody, would pray there. To cause ill to enemies, one would turn the peg. If one turned the peg in the idol's head, it would cause pain in the head; if one turned the peg in the stomach, one caused a bellyache. When one turned the peg in the arm, the whole arm moved and would stay in position. The legs were so pivoted that they moved forwards. There were joints at the groin and at the knees. The body of the idol was of wood, unpainted and a natural color. The limbs were slender. The head was set on the shoulders and the figure lacked a neck. The terminations of the limbs were slightly larger, but no digits were marked. The body and the whole of it was made round, and the face was merely the smooth surface of a cylinder. The eyes were large dots, eyebrows were two broad curves and the mouth a simple straight line. The eyes, eyebrows and nose were painted black while the mouth was painted red. In the ears were rings of wood as big as a fifty cent piece, placed through a pierced ear lobe. Strings of green glass

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* The informant is unidentified, but very probably she is the Endegunda [sic] Camarillo (Mrs. del Campo) from whom Harrington mentions later as having received information on the image. It is interesting to note that Mrs. D. W. Mott also wrote a description of the tree and mentioned that a crude figure like a doll, made of asphaltum, was placed there. This doll, she said, was the "Spirit of the Tree" and is now in the Smithsonian Institution.[5] Perhaps Mrs. Mott was aware of verbal references to the figure as well as Harrington's interest in it; therefore associating the object itself with the Smithsonian Institution. There is no evidence at present that Harrington ever collected such a doll.

beads were hung around the neck and shoulders. This image was about three feet tall, with the feet hung about five inches above the ground; it is depicted in the drawing.

Radiating from behind the head of the image were hawk feathers, about twenty in number, each of which was a foot long. The quills were obscured by the head. In the cavity in back of the idol were hanging from pegs many bunches of feathers, strings of pine nuts and the skins of various animals such as the wild cat. Baskets containing offerings of seeds, nuts and so forth were placed there, both inside [in the hollow?] and outside the tree.

Mrs. Francis* of Ventura said that about five and a half miles up toward the Ojai Valley and toward the Casitas bridge there once stood a large sycamore tree that overhung the road. This tree was on the east side of the Ventura River by Casitas Pass. It was known as the "Whistling Tree" and was a shrine of the Indians. She said that the Indians burned candles there and hung sticks with ribbon around the neck [of themselves?] and that they also placed ribbons# and fruits there. It was a shrine tree, and sprouts of it are still to be seen.

Fernando knows the sycamore tree of the wind; he knows just where it was. The trunk of the tree is still there, and there are also

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* Myrtle (Shepherd) Francis.

Making offerings, with the idea of creating favorable conditions and to avoid unfavorable ones, is typical of southern California Indians; and there are known examples in which such offerings were tied to trees. Latta describes the Yokuts custom of hanging charmstones from trees in order to call fish up stream, or to bring about favorable hunting.[6] Zigmond mentions the Kawaiisu practice of attaching feathers or eagledown to brush and trees as an aid in increasing the success in deerhunting.[7] Fernando told Harrington about the suspension of "whistling stones", through which the wind would blow and produce supernatural magic which could be used in creating love between a boy and girl. Another of Harrington's informants, Juan Justo, spoke about the Chumash practice of hanging feathers "from the tallest tree there was, sycamore or some other, and that the Indians also hung finer feathers called *shoHshu*". The *shoHshu,* Justo said, was blown to the four cardinal directions during the course of the night by a very strong wind. Applegate working from Harrington's placename notes, recorded that the name of the Wind Sycamore tree was *Ka'aqta'waq,* which meant "north wind".[8]

Myrtle Shepherd Francis

new sprouts. When Fernando was taken to the place, he seemed reasonably sure where the tree had stood. He said that José Raymundo,* a *Muwu*# Indian, was a medicine man who knew how to cure people by means of the god of the Wind Sycamore.

Endegunda Camarillo° is the woman who told me of the image of wood in the wind sycamore. She married Don Flavio Martinez. Simplicio Pico† doubts the story of the image; but she is the oldest of the Camarillos.

---

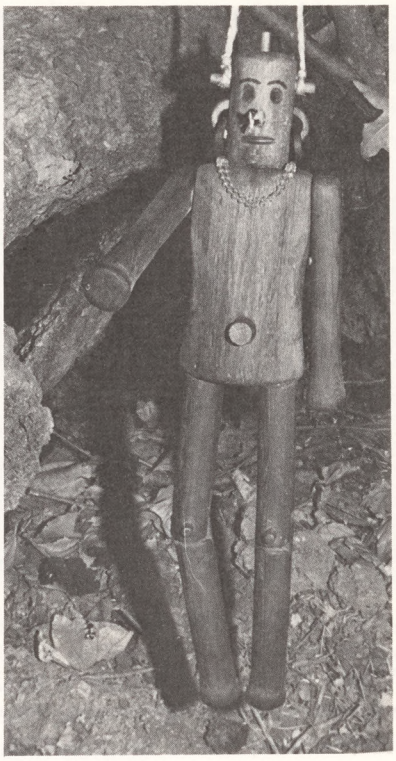
* José Raymundo *Ti'mi* was Fernando's grandfather, and a man well versed in Chumash knowledge concerning the use of supernatural powers.[9]

Muwu is the Chumash name for a large village located at what is now Point Mugu.

° In her father's will she is called Ildegunda, in other legal papers it is Yldegunda; but Aldegunda in a diary.

† Simplicio Pico was one of Harrington's Ventureño Chumash informants; he died in Ventura in 1918.[10]

Image



© Tom Roe

Fernando said that *Chiq'neq'sh** was the son of the wind, and that *'Alaliwaiya#* meant "hung thing in midair from a high thing" which was the Chumash name for Ballard Canyon; it was a shrine such as they have here in Ventura.° Fernando remembers seeing

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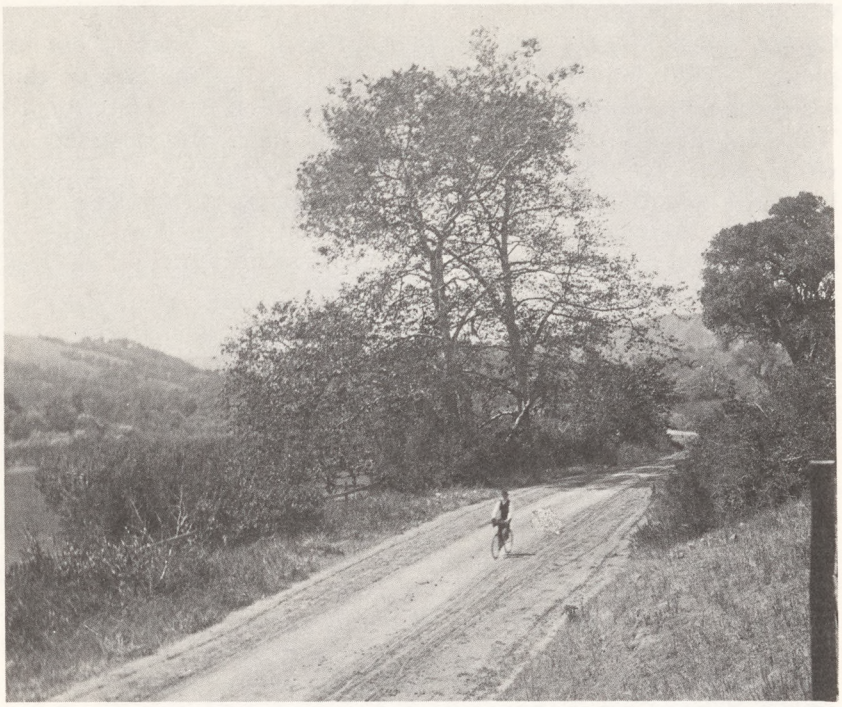
* *Chiq'neq'sh* was also said to have been a "child of the clouds". A myth about his supernatural birth and later his encounter with the "devil" can be found in *December's child.*[11]

Or *'Alaliwaiyan,* meaning "one that hangs"; this was the name given to the shrine-tree located in Alamo Pintado Canyon, north of Santa Ynez.[12]

° The Ventura shrine referred to is probably *'Iwayiki,* located west of Ventura on top of a hill. It is described in *The eye of the flute.*[13]



A grove at the turn of the century

at the Depository-of-the-Things-of-the-Dead* the head and body of a wooden jointed doll on which traces of former paint could be seen.# Jointed dolls were quite common with the head and body of one piece and the arms and legs, each a separate piece, pegged on.

ENDNOTES

In the voluminous biography of her mother, Myrtle Shepherd Francis almost pinpoints the location of the sycamore during a trip

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* Offerings of various sorts were made at shrines, including things which had belonged to the dead. Hence the name given.

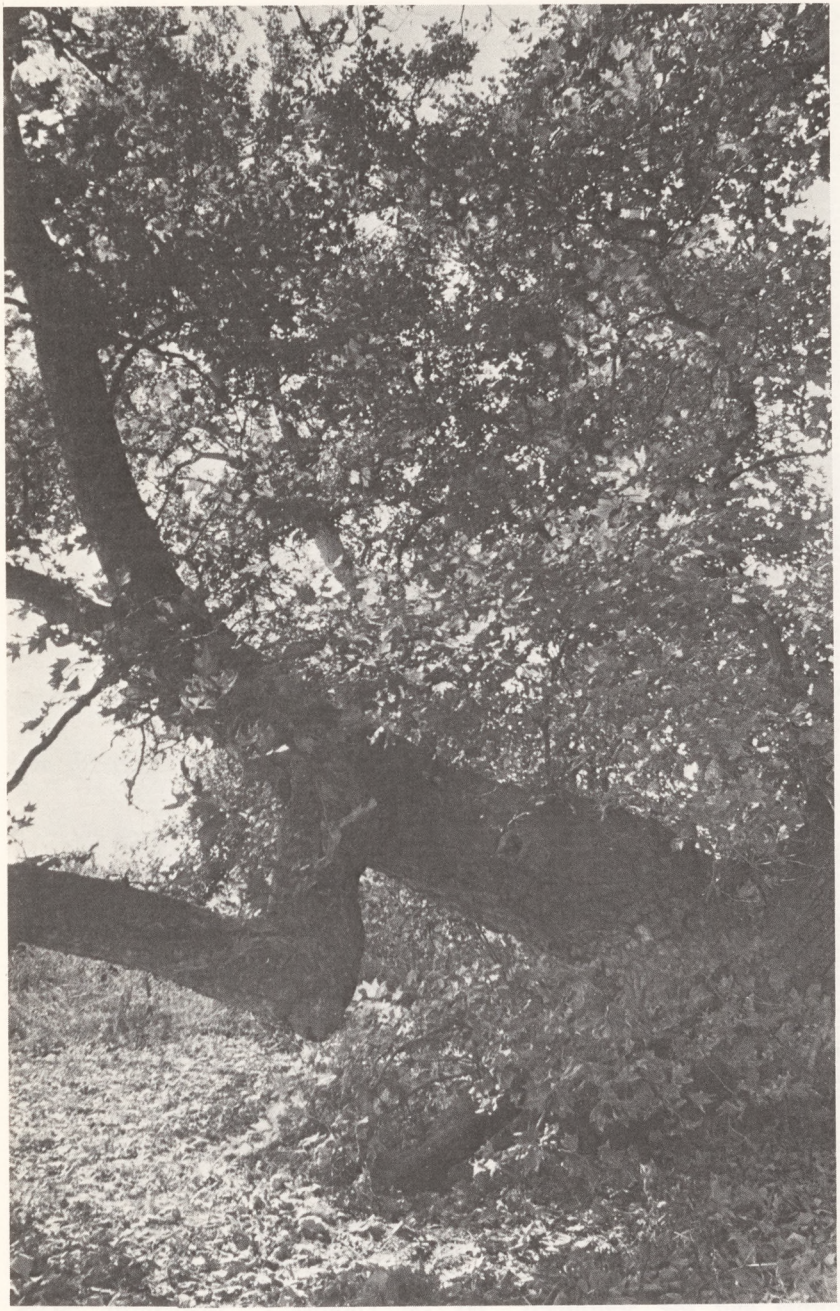
Fernando is describing dolls of common use, but his general description is remarkably similar to the Wind Sycamore idol.

which took the Shepherd family "north at Tico's up the Ventura Canyon. Ben Moraga with his team of oxen was starting out to plow; . . . Will pointed to a line of masonry below the hills on the east side of the canyon. 'That is the old mission acqueduct' [and] 'That is Chillson's', he said, 'We'll go there some day especially to see his roses' . . . They rattled over the rickety bridge. 'The Tapia barranca', said Will . . . He pointed to an adobe on the west side of the canyon. 'See that arbor over there in front of the adobe? One grapevine covers it. The trunk is as big around as my body, and a hundred people can sit down to a barbecue under it . . . Across here is the orchard of San Juan. The padres planted the olives and fruit trees and just beyond is the Santa Gertrude's Chapel' . . . The children were getting restless, so Will stopped for them to get out. They wandered through the ruined chapel of which there was nothing left but the walls and broken roof . . . The children clamored that they were thirsty. Theo produced a tin cup so they all went down to the tiny stream called the Ventura River, for a drink of lukewarm water . . . Driving a little further was a giant sycamore which almost obstructed the road, part of it resting on the ground. 'Children', said Will, 'This is a magic tree. Wishes made as you pass under it are said to come true' . . . A breath of wind swayed the umbrella. Will cried, 'Hold onto your hats children. This is Cañon del Viento (Canyon of the Wind)'." [14]

Archeologist Robert Lopez has pointed out that the Indians took over abandoned Christian buildings for pagan ceremonies. Would they not also have made silver offerings at their shrines? Acting on this assumption, I asked James Porter to bring his metal detector along when we checked around the sycamore trees near the river bottom west of the site of the *assistencia*. We located a grove which included a tree with a hollow at the bottom.

James Capito dug enough around the base to indicate the hollow was over three feet deep. The ground around it must have been raised by sheet flooding over the years. The broken arch of the tree faced south, and a natural amphitheatre was framed by the limbs of the branches. Jim was impressed enough to prepare an image to hang there. If this was not the exact site, it was like it might have been!

With the turn of the century the *Californios* referred to the willows and eucalyptus at the top of the grade as "Alisos del Viento", the Whistling Trees, from the constant breeze at this narrowest point.[15]



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The arch and the hollow

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4. *Ibid.*, 39-40.
5. Mrs. D. W. Mott, *Legends and lore of long ago*, 173-75.
6. *Handbook of the Yokuts Indians*, 201, 204 and 208.
7. "The supernatural world of the Kawaiisu", 78.
8. Richard Applegate, "Chumash placenames", 196; and "An index of of Chumash placenames", 30.
9. Thomas Blackburn, *December's child*, 18 and *The eye of the flute*, 3 and 50-51.
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11. *Ibid.*, 236-41 (Narrative 53).
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13. P. 62-63.
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15. Jim Arellanes.

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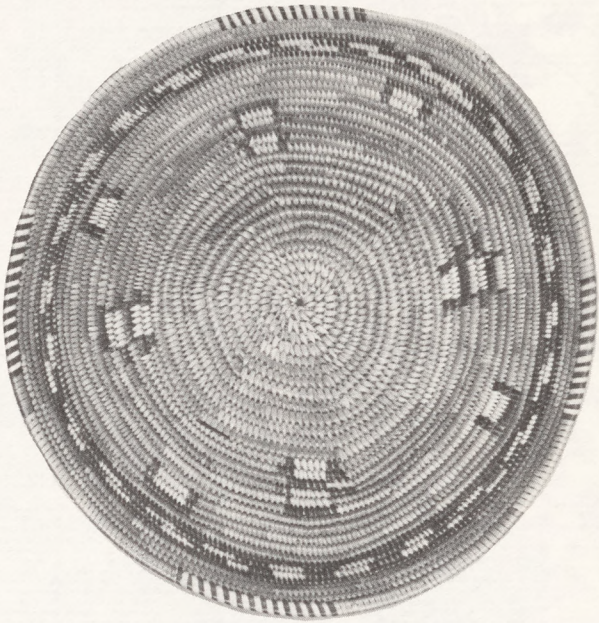
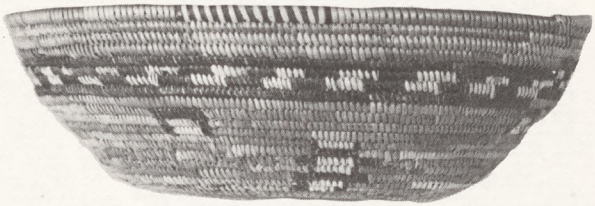
The hollow near the ground





The dark background is in the tradition of the Santa Ines region of the Chumash culture.

(diameter: 8 inches; foundation: Juncus; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material: Juncus; stitches per square inch: 60; coil ending: simple taper)

Chumash Indian Basketry

AT SAN BUENAVENTURA

By

Msgr. Francs J. Weber[1]

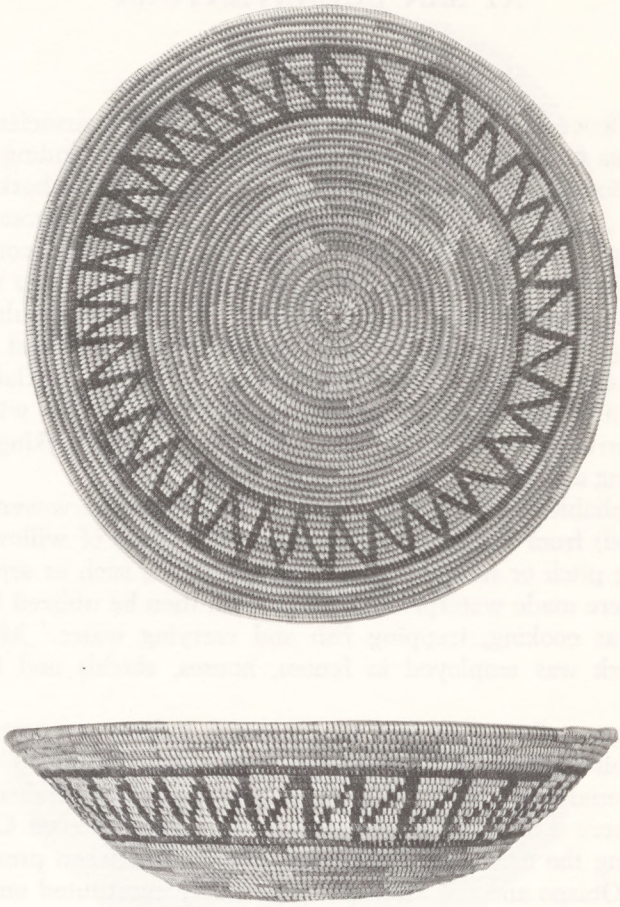
Excellence in the art of basketry has long been associated with the Indians of the Pacific Slope. Indeed, their outstanding skill in that handicraft prompted one authority to say that the baskets produced by the California Indians were far superior to those of any other people, in the fineness of weaving and beauty of decoration.

The basket industry was cultivated by the women who were ingenious in weaving grass, sumac, splints, rushes, cedar, tule, yucca stems, kelp thread, willow roots and sea plants into mats and baskets. Their finished products varied in sizes and shapes from flat, basin-shaped coiled weave bowls to the large pointed cones which the women carried on their backs when digging for roots, picking berries or gathering acorns.

The pliable baskets, some of which had lids, were woven (rather than coiled) from vegetable fibers often on a warp of willow strips. By adding pitch or some other resinous substance such as asphaltum, baskets were made waterproof. They could then be utilized for such purposes as cooking, trapping fish and carrying water. Moreover, basket-work was employed in fences, houses, shields and for harvesting.

It is generally agreed that the Chumash Indians were among the most sophisticated of all the native Californians, in terms of both their material and social culture. At the time of European penetration, there may have been between 10,000 and 15,000 Chumash living along the 6,500 square miles of coastline between present day San Luis Obispo and the Malibu.[2] If so, they constituted one of the largest groups of natives anywhere in western North America.

The early chroniclers expressed a particular fascination with the types of Indian basketry found at San Buenaventura Mission. Light, sturdy and attractive, the Chumash baskets were avidly sought out by the Europeans. Those fortunate enough to acquire baskets sent them back to New Spain, Peru and Spain. With the advent of the merchant ships, the baskets also found an eager market in London and Paris. At present the British Museum has one of the largest collections of Chumash baskets. Those baskets fashioned by the



The principal band in the design is unusually wide; rim ticks and body designs are lacking.

(diameter: 11 inches; foundation: Juncus; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material: Juncus; stitches per square inch: 105; coil ending: simple taper)

Ventureño Indians at San Buenaventura Mission were known for their fine workmanship, variety of forms and the manifold uses to which they were put.[3]

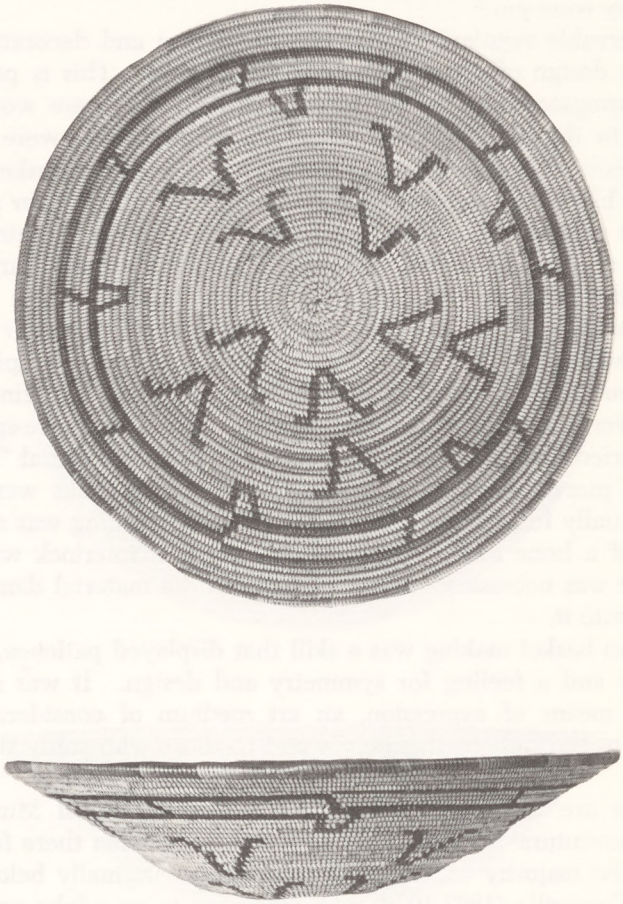
Observable regularities of techniques, form and decorative style make the design of Chumash baskets distinctive. This is party due to the variegated rush materials from which they were woven. In addition to the established tradition of design, there were explicit rules of composition and space division in Chumash baskets. The principal band, for example, and its distance from the rim are generally the same width. Rim "ticks" are usual. The geometrical and symbolic designs in the body of the basket blend into a harmonious unity in the finished product.[4]

Ventureño women used a rush (*Juncus textilis*) for their baskets. After it was dried, the straightest stalks were split. The pitch was scraped out with the roughened edge of a clamshell and, finally, the strands were bundled according to need. Some were re-split, and others buried in the mud for color effect. After the initial "start" of shredded pieces was well stitched, whole *juncus* stalks were introduced, usually for a three-strand foundation. Stitching was aided by the use of a bone awl, and the stitches did not interlock with each other. It was necessary, of course, to keep the material damp while working with it.

Indian basket making was a skill that displayed patience, a sense of beauty and a feeling for symmetry and design. It was a highly symbolic means of expression, an art medium of considerable importance to the Indians themselves and to those who study their way of life.

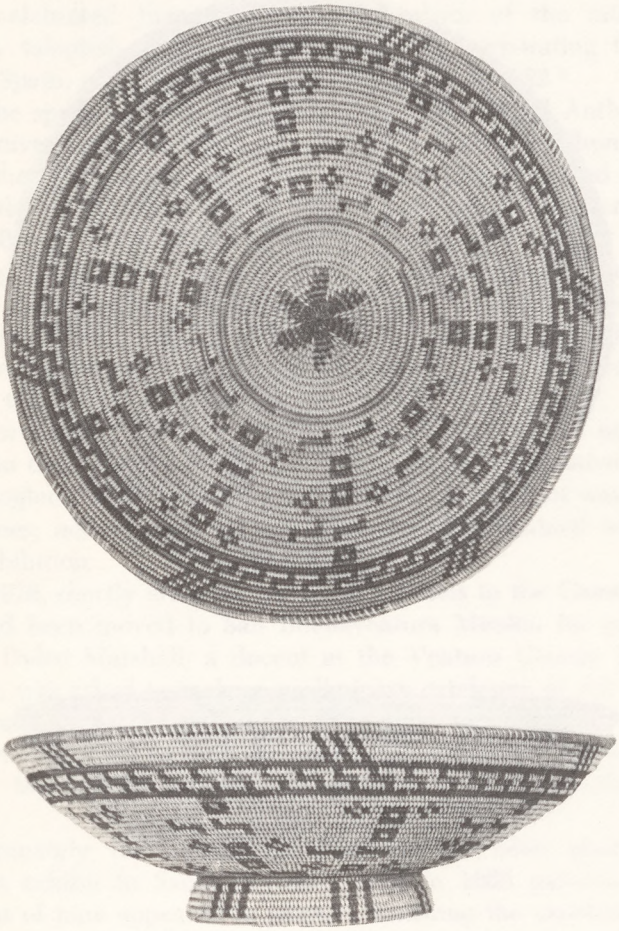
There are 25 baskets on display in the Historical Museum at San Buenaventura Mission, some of which have been there for many years. The majority of the Chumash baskets originally belonged to Juan E. Camarillo (1867-1936) who was born in an adobe near what is now Main Street and Ventura Avenue.[5] Their provenance is interesting. Following the erection of Saint Mary Magdalen in the town of Camarillo,[6] Juan set up a small family museum in a wing adjacent to the church, where he proudly displayed the various mementos he had amassed in his tours around the world.

Chumash baskets were rare even in those early days and Juan E. Camarillo's outstanding collection received considerable attention as one of California's lost artforms. Of all his valued possessions, none was more carefully cared for than those treasures acquired



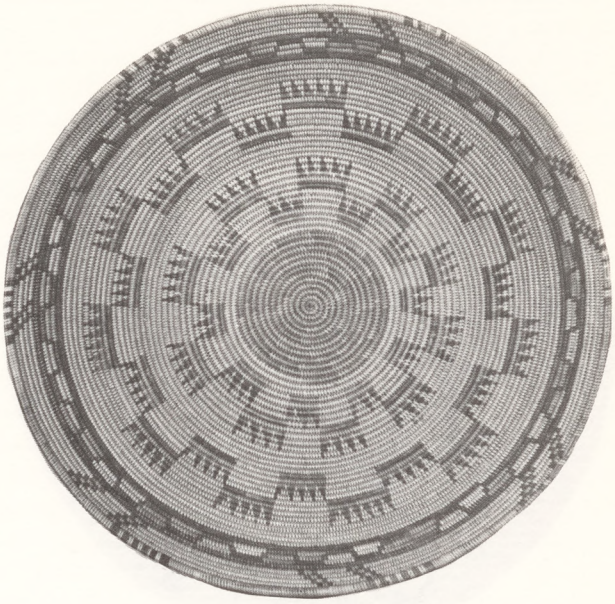
This basket lacks rim ticks, but has a dark *juncus* rim; body zone designs show southern affinities.

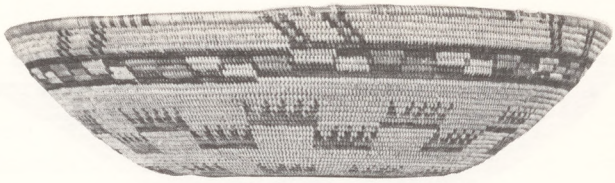
(diameter: 11¾ inches; foundation: Juncus; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material: Juncus; stitches per square inch: 85; coil ending: simple taper)



The excellent design and workmanship are traditional. It's pedestal is copied from European vessel shapes.

(diameter: 12⅛ inches; foundation: Juncus; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material: sumac, dark Juncus in designs, black Juncus; stitches per square inch: 90; coil ending; simple taper)





The balanced and subtle design of this bowl, which was probably used for food preparation and serving, has strong colors that add beauty to technical excellence.

(diameter: 15½ inches; foundation: Juncus; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material: sumac, dark Juncus in designs, black Juncus; stitches per square inch: 125; coil ending: simple taper)

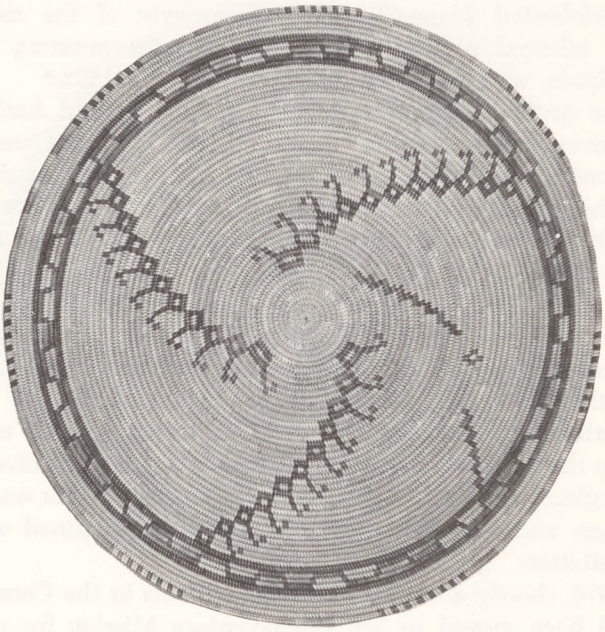
in his youth from elderly Indians at San Buenaventura. There is an oral tradition that one or more of the Camarillo baskets was woven by the celebrated Juana Basilia,[7] a neophyte of the mission, an especially talented woman. Juana's basket, incorporating the royal arms of Spain, was made for José de la Cruz in 1822.[8]

In the spring of 1964 the departments of Art and Anthropology of the University of California sponsored an exhibit of Chumash artifacts at their Santa Barbara campus. The occasion resulted in bringing together from all parts of the country a major segment of the known 200 Chumash baskets. In the process of gathering together the 85 specimens, the Pastor of Saint Mary Magdalen Church was asked if the Camarillo baskets might be included in the exhibit. Msgr. Dennis Falvey readily acquiesced; and when the exhibit was dismantled, he agreed to extend the original loan agreement so as to allow them to remain for a while at Santa Barbara.

Unfortunately for his successors, he seemingly left no written memos on the subject. The archeology section of the university was equally neglectful. In the next decade the senior professor was changed three times; and but one member of the staff remained who knew of the exhibition.

In 1976, shortly after the historical artifacts in the Camarillo museum had been moved to San Buenaventura Mission for permanent display, Delee Marshall, a docent at the Ventura County Historical Museum, was asked to make a preliminary catalogue of the few baskets remaining in the collection. She then asked about the other Chumash baskets. It was a revelation for neither the present Pastor of Saint Mary Magdalen Church nor the writer knew there were others.

Fortunately the Camarillo treasures had been photographed while on exhibit in Santa Barbara. And in 1965 pictures and descriptions of nine appeared in print.[9] Enlisting the assistance of Director Richard Esparza of the Ventura County Historical Museum, Mrs. Marshall was able to determine that six baskets were still on display at Santa Barbara. This writer notified Donald E. Brown, Chairman of the Department of Anthropology, on December 8, 1976 that the loan agreement was now terminated. Dr. Brown referred the matter to Dr. Michael Glassow in archeology who made arrangements for returning the baskets. On January 20, 1977 Mrs. Marshall and the writer journeyed to Goleta and recovered the six baskets. They were temporarily stored in the vault of the Ventura County



This utility basket has a foundation of coils fashioned from three stems of *juncus* rush. The stitches are very small and even, with split stitches showing in the base. The three part design in the body zone of this basket is unique.

(diameter: 17 inches; foundation: Juncus; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material:sumac, dark Juncus in design, black Juncus; stitches per square inch: 95; coil ending: simple taper)

Historical Museum until adequate facilities could be provided for them at the mission.

During the summer Robert O. Browne and William Kirk began to build a specially outfitted display case in which all the baskets belonging to San Buenaventura Mission could be exhibited, a project that was completed in late November. Mrs. Marshall then arranged the 25 specimens in place, providing explanatory panels about the procedure, design and traditions of the basket weavers. New labels were made and the old ones updated. The exhibit was opened to the general public on January 22, 1978.

Notes to the Text

1. The writer wishes to thank Delee Marshall, a knowledgeable person on California Indian basketry, for her many useful and penetrating observations about this essay.
2. These figures are those of Allen G. Pastron and C. W. Clewlow, "The Chumash Indians of California" in *Pacific discovery*, XXX, *1*, 19.
3. See Eugene N. Anderson, Jr., *The Chumash Indians of southern California* (Banning 1968) 9.
4. For an excellent treatment of Chumash baskets, see A. L. Kroeber, "Basket designs of the Mission Indians of California" in the *Anthropological papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, XX, 177-183.
5. Juan's father came to Alta California with the Hijar-Padres Expedition in 1834. When San Buenaventura was incorporated as a city in 1866, he was a member of the first Board of Trustees. Nine years later the Camarillo family acquired title to the Rancho Calleguas, a land grant conveyed to José Ruiz in 1837.
6. Dedicated July 4, 1913, the church was built by Juan E. Camarillo as a memorial to his mother.
7. Juana Basilia (1782-1838) was a native of the Rancheria of Sumuahuahua. She was baptized at San Buenaventura Mission on February 7, 1806. See Zephyrin Engelhardt, *San Buenaventura, the mission by the sea* (Santa Barbara 1930) 154-160.
8. See Zelia Nuttall, "Two remarkable California baskets" in the *California Historical Society Quarterly*, II, 341-343.
9. See Lawrence Dawson and James Deetz, "A corpus of Chumash basketry" in the 1965 *Annual report of the University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Anthropology (Archaeological survey*, 195-212, 24 plates).

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